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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENGDU 000274

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DEPT FOR EAP/CM AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2017

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SUBJECT: KUNMING CHURCH FLOURISHES DESPITE RESTRICTIONS

REF: A) CHENGDU 126 B) CHENGDU 272

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to the co-pastors of an officially-registered church in southwest China, while person-to-person proselytizing remains severely restricted, the number of Protestants in the city is growing rapidly. The city of Kunming, including subordinate adjacent counties, has 360 approved religious venues for small groups of Protestants but very few churches. One district committee representative in Kunming has called publicly for the city to build more churches and highlighted in an official proposal published on a government web site the "positive role of religion." Her mention also of how approved churches can help prevent "nefarious" foreign missionaries who "infiltrate Yunnan under various pretexts" from making inroads in the province, however, is more likely to appeal to the local Party leadership. End Summary.

A Busy Church

¶2. (SBU) During a recent Sunday in the Yunnan provincial capital of Kunming, Congenoff visited St. John's, a non-denominational official Protestant church in the center of the city. The well-appointed church, located at the north end of Kunming's Jewelry Street, was renovated in 2006. Some shops are housed on the first floor of the church building (Note: Commercial income has likely been a major source of support for this construction and upkeep of the fine new building. One indication is a posting on a Chinese Christian internet forum denouncing the real estate deal that made the new building possible, claiming that many in the congregation opposed it. End note).

¶3. (SBU) The church, which has a seating capacity of 1400 people, has two Sunday services. In her sermon, the pastor discussed such social problems such as the rapidly rising divorce rate in central Kunming and as well as the moral support that religion can provide. Many children attended the service and the Sunday school on the upper floor of the church. There were many people in their twenties and thirties among the congregation. A new sound system and video projection of the Bible and hymn texts enabled the congregation to follow along with the service.

Parishioners and Pastors

14. (C) Congenoff spoke with a man in his thirties holding two young boys following the church service. The man said his family, which has been Christian for several generations, lives in the countryside. Now he lives in a Kunming suburb with his wife and two children. Although there is also a church in his area, he prefers to come to St. John's since people attending services there are generally better educated. Christians in the countryside really don't understand their faith, he said. He noted that since he has a rural household registration, he and his wife were allowed to have two children. He added that the two children dispensation for Yunnan people with rural registrations will end in three years, apparently a consequence of Yunnan's elimination of rural registrations that will take effect in January 2008. The man noted that Christians, as idealists in a materialist led society can lose out in the workplace, but have to accept some suffering for their faith.

15. (C) When asked the apparently more sensitive question, "Have the authorities allowed the founding of new Christian congregations in the area?" he looked around before answering. He avoided giving a direct answer, saying first that a proposal for a new congregation would need the approval of the government's religious affairs authorities and, after Congenoff's second formulation of the question, "A proposal to form a new congregation and build a new church must not conflict with the Kunming City government's plan for the city." (Note: Congen in ref A reported on the Protestant underground house churches in Kunming earlier this year. End note).

16. (C) Later when Congenoff asked one of the church's two pastors -- a husband and wife team -- several moderately sensitive questions, the pastor too paused and looked around before answering. (Comment: Despite well-attended services, there appear to still be shadows of intimidation at the church. End comment). Both pastors are graduates of the Nanjing Theological Seminary, an officially supported non-denominational Protestant seminary, with the husband succeeding his father as

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pastor in 1986 shortly after St. John's was returned to its congregation following a long closure.

Protestants, Catholics, Proselytizing

17. (C) According to the pastor Congenoff spoke with, the Protestant community in Kunming is growing rapidly but the number of Catholics is holding steady or declining slightly. A youth group meets in the church on Thursday nights. The pastor said, "The Catholics are more conservative" and sometimes lose priests to marriage. He also noted he knew several priests who had left the priesthood when they married and remarked he has cordial relations with several Catholic priests and they regularly visit each other's congregations.

18. (C) When Congenoff asked the pastor whether the religious authorities objected to the large Sunday School program and the many young people in the church, he replied, "That is beyond their control" (Tamen guanbuliao). A young woman in the pew next to Congenoff said she had been introduced to St. John's by her high school teacher. With regard to possible foreign missionary activity, the pastor noted a South Korean pastor had recently been sent home because he would not observe restrictions on preaching. The government recruited another pastor for the Koreans who was ordered to limit himself to serving Koreans.

19. (C) Although he and his wife may not preach outside the church or an authorized religious venue, the pastor noted they can encourage individuals to attend Church services. Distributing religious literature on the street is also forbidden. The pastor told Congenoff that the national and local regulations that govern their religious work are available

online and suggested that Congenoff read them. (Note. Ref B followed up on the pastor's suggestion by translating and analyzing some of the Kunming City and other local religious affairs regulations that govern the religious activities of local believers and their churches. End note).

¶10. (SBU) As Congenoff left St. John's, he stopped to listen to conversations in the near the church bookstore which offers a variety of Chinese translations of books by foreign, especially U.S. Christian leaders and histories of 19th century missions in China, as well as Chiang Kai-shek's favorite Christian inspirational book "Streams in the Desert". There was a long, friendly discussion underway between a visiting Buddhist in his twenties and a man in his thirties who described himself as a former Buddhist. The two discussed the nature of God in Christian and Buddhist texts while an old man looked on smiling broadly.

District People's Consultative Congress Rep Calls for More Churches

¶11. (U) Given that St. John's services are filled to capacity, its enthusiastic congregation, and its busy Sunday School, the question arises as to why there are only two official Protestant churches in Kunming. A third, St. Zion (Sheng Xi'an) is in disrepair and so is no longer used for services. Kunming Wuhou District PPC representative Yang Meirong, in her January 2007 submission to the Wuhu District Committee of the National People's Consultative Congress argues that Kunming needs more churches. A Congen summary translation of Yang's proposal, found on a Kunming City website, follows.

¶12. (U) Yang Meirong writes: "The number of Protestants in Kunming is growing rapidly. With the development of material society, people feel their spiritual needs more urgently, so many are turning to religion. Kunming, however has only three churches, all near the city center. ~ In 1949, Kunming had 15 - 16 churches serving a little over 2000 Chinese citizen Protestants. Now, our conservative estimate is that there are 30 - 40,000 Christians in the urban district of Kunming City. We have two medium size churches - the international church, with a capacity of 2000, that opened on December 11, 2004 and the rebuilt St. John's with a capacity of 1500 that opened on November 11, 2005. The third church St. Zion (Sheng Xi'an) has been declared a hazardous structure, but there are no firm plans yet for its renovation." Yang as an example points to the northern district of Kunming, where there is no church but thousands of Protestants. She writes "Some people register a new gathering place, others register a home gathering place, while some who oppose registration on principle hold their own meeting."

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¶13. (U) Yang points out that the people leading the services are untrained and so the meetings are open to "unsavory influences" from outside. Many "foreign missionary groups use business, travel, culture, education, and medical services to penetrate Chinese Christian groups and are a serious challenge to the Chinese Three Selves (Self-governing, Self-financing and Self-propagating) Protestant churches just after it comes to its feet after a long difficult period." Yang suggests the District Party Committee and District government allocate land for establishing new churches. She points to the examples of Beijing and Shanghai as well as Hangzhou's plan to build the largest church in the Chinese-speaking world. It will seat 7000 people.

¶14. (U) Yang writes she believes in the saying, "Build one more church, build one less prison." She cites the example of Yunnan's Fugong County in Nujiang Prefecture, "the only county in the area without a drug problem." Yang argues this is because

Protestants are a large majority of the population. She notes that the situation is similar in Funnan County where 70,000 of the population of 80,000 people are Protestants.

Comment

¶15. (C) The CPCC (Chinese People's Consultative Congress) of which Yang is a district committee member includes many people from outside the Communist Party, so it is not surprising that a committee member made this potentially politically incorrect proposal that highlights the positive role that religion can play in society. Yang's argument on the positive role of religion in society of course contradicts Chinese Communist Party doctrine that religion will gradually fade as people become more educated and society advances. Her warning that Christians without churches will be more exposed to "nefarious" outside missionaries, however, may well attract local Party support to her proposal to build more churches in Kunming. (Reference note: Proposal to the Fifth Session of Sixth Kunming Wuhou District Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Congress "On increasing the number of Protestant churches and religious venues in the Wuhua District" dated January 21, 2007 from Yang Meirong. From the Kunming City Wuhua District website, URL abbreviation: . End reference note).

St. John's Church History

¶16. (U) Begin excerpted text Congenoff was given of a brief history of St. John's Church: "St. John's Christian Church in Kunming is located in the downtown area of the Spring City. The historic church was originally a Chinese Anglican Church first built in 1915 and then reconstructed three times, from the original earthwork structure to the current concrete building. The current St. John's building was begun in 1944 and completed in 1945. That was at the dawn of victory of the Second Anti-Fascist World War. Under the leadership of General Chennault, the American Flying Tigers came to China for help. ~In the interception of the Japanese air force, seventeen pilots died. Two of them were English, one was Swedish and the other fourteen were Americans. ~To commemorate these pilots~. A monument was erected. Packs containing the ashes of seventeen pilots were hung on the inside walls of the church. In 1948, when the American Consulate in Kunming withdrew, the ashes were taken as well. ~ In 1949, the PRC was founded. After 1958 the worship of Kunming Protestants was united [into a non-denominational Protestant church]. St. John's stopped worship during the Cultural Revolution~ With the Open Door policy in China, freedom of religion was adopted~. In 1986~ the site was returned to the church by the Municipal Vehicle Industrial Corporation. In previous years the numbers of brothers and sisters attending worship services was about 300, but now (2001) it is over 2000.

End Text.
BOUGHNER